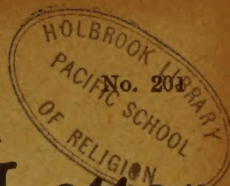


# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by  
J. H. OLDHAM



February 9th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

In sending the letter which forms this week's Supplement Mr. Curtis told me to print it or not as I liked. I am glad to publish it for two chief reasons.

First, because Mr. Curtis affirms the elementary but important truth that, if we want to achieve something in our brief lives, we must first clearly envisage the object we seek and then pursue it with a single eye and undivided strength. He is himself an outstanding example of one who in his early years made up his mind what he would live for and has allowed nothing to divert him from his chosen aim. His insistence on the clear vision and the single eye is directly relevant to the purpose of the Archbishop's Supplement. That purpose was to make stand out from the maze of questions which in turn arouse our interest the key points at which Christian faith is sharply at issue with dominant tendencies in the life of to-day, in order that, when this is made clear, a growing band of people may take their stand, 'burn their boats, and without looking back dedicate their lives to changing the basic assumptions, temper and outlook of our time.

Secondly, it is not only because of the Archbishop's Supplement that Mr. Curtis regards the News-Letter in which it appears as "by far the most important of all your issues," but also because of the letter it contained from a correspondent on the continent. He is not content to read about the legacy of totalitarianism and total war in Europe and pass to some new interest, but realizes that a state of things "more widespread and more appalling" than anything that has existed in Europe since the fourth century calls for the most effective combined action of which we are capable. Because of this passionate plea, if for no other reason, his letter deserves to be passed on.

There is perhaps a greater divergence than Mr. Curtis supposes between the presuppositions of what he writes and those of the Archbishop's Supplement. Mr. Curtis writes from the standpoint of what is commonly described as "liberal theology." By this I mean here not unorthodoxy in regard to particular Christian doctrines, but a set of assumptions and way of thinking to which many active and powerful Christian minds to-day, including thinkers who are by no means orthodox in the traditional sense, are strongly opposed. But as a friend who himself belongs to the newer school, and who saw the Supplement in manuscript, remarked, "while Curtis expresses himself in terms of the liberal thought in which his generation grew up, his practical apprehension of the meaning of Christian obedience leaves most of our theologians standing, in spite of their more impeccable theological utterances."

## THE ARCHBISHOP'S SUPPLEMENT<sup>1</sup>

A number of comments on the Archbishop's Supplement attribute to it the same significance as Mr. Curtis does. There have also been some strongly expressed adverse comments, chiefly on the ground that the Supplement is beyond the understanding of ordinary people—"if Christianity is as difficult as all that, what message has it for the plain man?" The Archbishop was not, however, attempting in this paper to interpret the meaning of Christianity for the individual, which can certainly be stated in terms that the simplest can understand, but was dealing with the quite different question of the meaning of Christianity for the present historical situation as a whole. While the Gospel is simple, the contemporary situation most certainly is not. It comprises movements of thought and social forces, the understanding of even one of which may be the task of a life-time.

It is by no means the business of everyone to concern himself with these larger issues; the majority have immediate, particular tasks which absorb their strength. The ordinary soldier has not the time, training or knowledge to engage his mind with the problems of central strategy, but it is vital to the success of his efforts that there should be a central strategy and that it should be the right strategy. The Supplement was addressed primarily to those whose job it is to understand the deep currents of modern life and where they are carrying our society, but it should encourage all Christians to know that among those who have devoted a life-time to the study of these questions there is a deepening agreement about the crucial points on the total battle-front at which fundamental choices have to be made.

But a clear perception of these fundamental choices is only the beginning. Before us lies what is the task of a generation, namely to discover what they imply for an endless variety of concrete situations. Only the event can show whether the decisions have enough of a cutting edge to compel men to take sides in the real conflicts of our time. The question that has still to be decided is whether we can put enough meaning into these decisions, in both thought and action, to bring into existence a force strong enough to turn back the currents that are hurrying our society to disaster.

## FINITE FREEDOM

In commenting on a letter from a school headmistress, who asked what she might teach her girls about the Christian's responsibility for making a better society, I appealed to theologians to help us to regain the full-orbed Christian truth about man. The request was anticipated in a welcome contribution by Professor Paul Tillich in the current number of *Christianity and Society*.<sup>2</sup> The structure, subject-matter, language and style of the paper are quite different from the Archbishop's Supplement, but its real substance seems to call for the same decisions

<sup>1</sup> Now available in pamphlet form: *What Christians Stand for in the Secular World*. Student Christian Movement Press, 6d., post free 7d.

<sup>2</sup> A small quarterly edited by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, containing an unusual amount of stimulating matter. Copies may be obtained from the Rev. Ronald Preston, Annandale, North End Road, London, N.W. 11. Annual subscription 4s., single copies 1s. (plus postage).



and to carry the same practical implications. I will try to put in my own way the gist of what I understand Professor Tillich to be saying.

In the face of modern denials in the most varied quarters he insists on the crucial fact that man is a distinct *kind*. The essence of man's distinctive nature is that he not merely has, but *is*, finite freedom. The noun separates him from the animals; the adjective declares his infinite distance from God.

Man's freedom lies in his power to transcend any given situation. He is never merely part of it; he can always do something to change it. He has the capacity to create. To produce something new is to change the *whole* of things; the power to create is infinite in its reach.

But man's freedom, amazing though it is, is a limited freedom. This combination of infinite possibilities with inescapable finitude gives to human life its *tragic* character. Man has the capacity to share in the creative activity of God; but to exercise this capacity rightly he would need to know the infinite consequences of every decision and to act in complete harmony with God's purpose. When he acts in defiance of these limitations his creativity becomes *demonic* and leads to tragedy, as we see from the evils which Hitler has let loose on the world.

It is an illusion to suppose that either progress or revolution will emancipate man from the finitude and sinfulness that belong to his nature. All our advances confront us with new possibilities of evil as well as of good. The perfect never appears in history.

If we accept in all its implications the truth that man is free and at the same time finite and sinful, there will be reservations in our assent to Mr. Curtis's hopes of a world commonwealth in which all are dedicated to the good of each. These expectations presuppose a greater and more stable natural goodness and a greater capacity of men to achieve their conscious aims than are warranted by a realistic view of man's nature and history.

Those who feel intensely the evils of the world and are fiercely attacking them are apt to be impatient with the reservations which are implied in the Christian view of man. The revolutionary Marxist does not believe that men will act with enthusiasm and uncalculating devotion unless they believe that the revolution will usher in a real fulfilment of human life. The liberal reformer asks how you can work whole-heartedly for the world commonwealth unless you believe passionately in the possibility of its realization.

We face a real dilemma. Can you have effective political action without belief in some kind of human utopia? On the one hand, to look for a state of society in which human finitude and sinfulness are transcended is to be blind to the realities of human existence, and can only lead in the end to disillusionment and despair. On the other hand, the refusal to be buoyed up by false hopes is apt to issue in inaction and passive acquiescence in things as they are.

There appears to be no solution of the dilemma on the human plane. Only faith in God can point a way out. Christianity insists not only on man's finitude, but also on his freedom to hear and obey God's call. Freedom means that finite acts can have an infinite meaning. Men can act daringly and decisively in obedience to what they believe

to be the will of God, leaving the consequences in His hands. No motive ought to be more powerful in impelling men to work for the removal of war than the knowledge of its complete contradiction of God's purpose made known in Christ.

But the only proof lies in action. The answer to the cynic or to the utopian has to be given not in words but in deeds. Christians have to demonstrate that faith in God does inspire an all-out attack on evil. A real decision for God ought to have immense practical consequences.

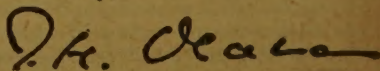
The implications of the conception of man as finite freedom are endless. Take three illustrations.

First, if man is to realize the freedom which belongs to his nature, he must share in what Professor Tillich calls "historical self-determination"; that is, there must be some sphere of human activity in which he knows that he counts for something. In virtue of his nature as man every one has an equal claim to be acknowledged as a person, that is to say, as an individual embodiment of creative freedom, and to be given some opportunity of exercising this freedom.

Secondly, the fact that man's freedom is finite means that he has always to exercise it in a particular, accidental, concrete, historical situation. He cannot do everything; all possibilities are not open to him. His actions cannot be determined by principles or ideals alone, but must be guided also by the circumstances in which the action has to be taken. We have to know the signs of the times and accommodate our actions to what they demand. Professor Tillich is at one with the Archbishop in insisting on the significance of history. Christian action is not a matter of "applying" general "principles" to one situation after another, but of understanding the dynamic situation in which we have to act and responding to the living God who meets us in that situation.

Thirdly, a large part of the evil and misery in the world can be traced to men's constant effort to escape from the limits of their finitude. Every finite reality tends to claim an infinite significance. All human achievements are exposed to the temptation to elevate themselves into absolutes and through this attempt become involved in ruin. The profound teaching of Christianity is that it is the broken and humble in spirit who are most open to the Divine. It is those who have been weaned through suffering from pride in themselves and their achievements who can exercise creative freedom without accompanying destructiveness.

Yours sincerely,



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## FAITH AND WORKS

ALL SOULS COLLEGE,  
OXFORD.

January 9th, 1944.

MY DEAR OLDHAM,

After reading several times your supplement of October 6th (No. 192) on *Belief in the Resurrection*, I feel that the discussion you started in your letter of June 30th (No. 185) may have put me into a position for which I am not fitted. I am not a philosopher or theologian, and have no authority to speak as such. I graduated in *Literae Humaniores* with no marked distinction, and so when I find Professor John Macmurray and Professor O. C. Quick commenting on my views, I feel as an ordinary business man might feel who had drifted into a controversy on the gold standard and international currency with Lord Keynes and Professor Clay. My job in life has been that of a political journeyman. As a young official Lord Milner set me the task of organizing a municipal system in the Transvaal. When responsible government was promised to the two former Republics, Lord Selborne employed me to draft a Memorandum on the question how to prevent a renewal of conflict with the two British Colonies. The answer was the Union consummated in 1909. Milner, Selborne and others then set me the task of surveying the Imperial problem.

In the works of Admiral Mahan I had found a philosophy I could understand, which was this: When you are trying to accomplish something, you should first decide what is the final object you are seeking to attain—and then never lose sight of it. I was thus faced by the question what was the final purpose of the Empire. It embraced one quarter of mankind, in all its varieties of climate, race, religion and civilization. It was, in fact, a cross-section of human society. So, in trying to answer that question I found myself asking what is the real end and object of human life on this earth.

In *Civitas Dei* I have tried to state the answer I found for the benefit of readers who might find the language in which philosophers and theologians exchange their thoughts as hard to understand as I do myself. The answer I found was as follows. "The pearl beyond price" is that instinct in men, however imperfect, to put the good of others before their own. The final object of human life is to perfect this instinct in men; and the right political system

is one that always keeps that object in view. This moral instinct is the force which, like gravity in the physical world, holds men together in an organized society called the state. To me it seemed that the truth of this instinct must be a matter of faith, which could neither be proved nor disproved by any event in history. But if we believe that to put the instincts of others before our own is a matter of infinite importance, then our personalities must be something which exist beyond time and space, must be indestructible. If the moral sense is valid, the personalities which feel that sense must be immortal. This again is a faith which from its nature cannot be proved or disproved by any event, miraculous or otherwise, which happens in history.

It was this particular point which you challenged in your letter of June 30th. In your supplement of October 6th you quote a number of correspondents in support of your view, whose arguments, so far as I have been able to understand them, have not led me to change my view of this subject as stated in *Civitas Dei* and in *Faith and Works*. I drafted a somewhat lengthy reply and discussed this draft at length with three friends, two of whom are in holy orders. But before I could sit down to revise the draft in the light of their comments, I received and read your letter and supplement of 29th December, and threw my draft into the waste paper basket.

This letter and supplement seem to me by far the most important of all your issues. Since it was published the murder of Hr. Munk in Denmark will bring home to your readers the terrible truth behind it. The letter you quote depicts a condition in Europe more widespread and more appalling than anything which St. Augustine and the century which followed him had to face. It sounds like the cry of the Macedonian to come over and help, which St. Paul heard in a dream. My feeling is that we should at this juncture concentrate all our powers of body, soul and mind on answering this cry, and postpone discussion as to the foundations of our faith, vital as I feel such questions are; and this feeling is reinforced by the supplement in which the Archbishop of Canterbury, so far as I can understand his closely reasoned words, is giving a lead which all can follow who agree that our Lord called us to accomplish the Kingdom of God upon earth, a society based on the infinite duty of each man to God and his fellow men.

On page 1 Dr. Temple remarks that "In the nineteenth century men still assumed a Law of God as universally supreme. In this country, at any rate, it was widely believed that God, whose nature was revealed in the Gospel and proclaimed by the Church, was also the orderer of the world and of life; in only a few quarters was the alienation of the actual order from any subjection to God and the Father of Jesus Christ perceived or stated. The Church was,



therefore, free to concentrate its main energies on its distinctive task of proclaiming the Gospel of redemption without any sense of incongruity with the ordering of life in the world outside. Theologians could undertake the task of showing that Christianity enables us to 'make sense' of the world with the meaning 'show that it is sense.' And those of us who were trained under those influences went on talking like that ; I was still talking like that when Hitler became Chancellor of the German Reich.

"All that seems remote to-day. We must still claim that Christianity enables us to 'make sense' of the world, not meaning that we can show that it is sense, but with the more literal and radical meaning of making into sense what, till it is transformed, is largely nonsense—a disordered chaos waiting to be reduced to order as the Spirit of God gives it shape. . . ."

This frank avowal of a change of outlook at a definite moment from one so placed in authority will evoke a feeling of widespread respect. The same change, I believe, took place for the same reasons in the minds of a vast number of Christians, including myself. It was just this change of outlook that since 1933 I have been trying to put forward in *Civitas Dei*.

Is it too much to hope that the Churches should now unite in telling their members that the task committed to the followers of Christ is that "of making into sense a disordered chaos waiting to be reduced to order as the Spirit of God gives it shape" ?

The importance of your issue of 29th December lies in this, that side by side with this call from the Archbishop, the letter from Europe you quote gives a picture drawn at close quarters of the "disordered chaos" we are called upon to face.

Here, I submit, is a call to which all the Churches and all the Christians for whom they speak can respond.

Our immediate tasks are first to destroy the Nazi power, and then to feed and clothe whole starving nations, to put an end to homicide and plunder, and restore the rule of law in Europe. To effect these immediate objects, the Allied governments have already made their preparations. But this when accomplished will not have done more than touch the real task of "reducing this disordered chaos to order." That real task will only be accomplished in so far as we take effective steps to secure that the world will not be a third time reduced to "disordered chaos" by an outbreak of totalitarian war. That is the essential problem to which we are already committed by the Atlantic Charter. Our greatest danger, to my mind, is readiness to think that practical problems can be solved by finding and repeating the right phrases. To my thinking, this second war and the "disordered chaos" depicted in your letter, are more due to the phrase "collective security" than to

any other one cause. I hope and believe that the Churches will respond to the Archbishop's lead by telling their members that the first duty of Christians is to create a society so based on the Spirit of God that this tragedy of world-war cannot again happen. But that surely imposes on individual Christians the duty of applying their minds to seeing and showing what practical steps must be taken now by ourselves in order that men may reach this goal. I come back to Mahan's philosophy that the secret of effective action is to see clearly the object you are trying to attain and then never lose sight of it. I feel that in this supplement the Archbishop has set such an object before us ; and I hope and pray that the Churches will follow the lead he has given. Such a lead, however, will have no effect except in so far as their members "perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same." I quote from the collect for to-day.

When I urge that Churches should call men to the task of creating a world commonwealth, I do not mean that the Church as such should advocate any particular programme of politics. I do mean that those who hear that call should devote their minds, bodies and souls to the task of building a world commonwealth. As one with some political training and experience I have felt it my paramount duty, in this tremendous crisis we are facing, to think what is the next practical step which we members of this imperfect British Commonwealth can take, which will lead us in the centuries to come to a world commonwealth. The best answer I can find is that stated in *Faith and Works*. I believe that we in the British democracies have at this juncture a unique chance of showing that national sovereignties can be merged into one international sovereignty. I believe that if we can do that in the next generation we shall achieve the greatest step ever taken in history toward "that far-off divine event," which our Lord foresaw when He called on men to create the Kingdom of God upon earth. I do not wish or expect any Church to advocate my own proposal. But I do believe that it is for Churches to realize and say, in unequivocal terms, that the supreme task laid by Christ on His followers was to create on earth a system of society based on the duty of each to all, which must in fact be a world commonwealth.

Ever yours sincerely,

LIONEL CURTIS.

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